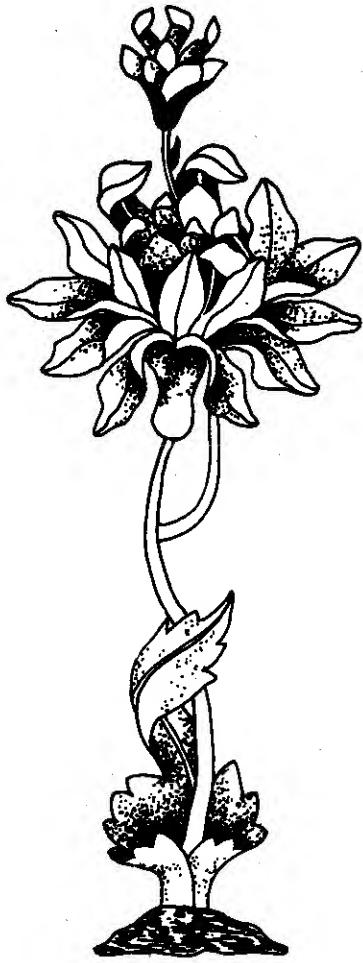


# Story of the Taj





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MADHUBAN

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The city of Agra in 1607 was a metropolis, with large and fashionable houses, well-kept gardens, and fountains and springs in large parks. It had broad roads and a number of bazaars which sold costly goods from Persia, Turkey, Arabia, Samarkand, Baghdad, China, and Europe.

Palatial brick and sandstone buildings belonging to the rajas, court ministers, and other noblemen stood along the route to the royal Agra fort. This was the Mughal emperor Jahangir's palace. Built on the banks of the river Yamuna, the imperial fort was a town in itself. Four miles in circumference, it had green lawns, marble fountains, hanging gardens, and waterways. Grand buildings (one housing the largest library in India), mosques, harems, private chambers and balconies ornamented with rubies, their ceilings of solid gold, as well as kiosks, terraces, and courtyards made of sandstone and marble stood within the high walls of the fort. Two deep moats ran all around the fort, and the only way to enter it was over a huge drawbridge guarded by soldiers.

It was here, in this great fort, that one day a royal fête was in progress. This bazaar was normally meant only for women of the nobility to do their shopping. On festive days, however, court ladies became shopkeepers for the day, haggling with princes and courtiers who, on their part, acted out the role of stingy shoppers.

*A typical Mughal noblewoman.*



Such a festival was on, and ladies of the court sold silks, jewellery, oils and bangles to noblemen. Selling beautiful ornaments at one stall was a young and lovely girl of fifteen, named Arjumand Banu Begum. She had dark hair and mischievous eyes. An astute shopkeeper, not many left her stall without parting with their money.

Unknown to the beautiful Arjumand, Khurram, the Mughal prince, decided to visit the festive bazaar. He rode in at the head of 20 Arabian thoroughbreds, bedecked in rich and expensive saddlecloth. With a flick of his fingers he dispersed the bodyguards that always accompanied him. Courtiers heralded his arrival with the sound of trumpets. "Silence those trumpets!" he ordered. "I do not want

the whole world to know I am here."

The 16-year-old Prince Khurram alighted from his horse and strolled into the bazaar. He walked from stall to stall, speaking to friends and acquaintances, buying a piece here, a trinket there, looking at all the new and pretty faces around. He stopped at one of the tents, surprised to see a lovely young girl arrogantly telling a young man that he could not buy the ring she held up for him to see since it cost 100 gold coins. Prince Khurram walked up to her and held out his hand for the ring. "Let me see it," he said.

Arjumand stared in astonishment at the richly dressed, aristocratic boy, his high forehead crowned with a bejewelled turban. Her eyes flashed. "This piece of glass," she said with pride, "costs 100 gold coins. Buy it if you will . . ." and she laughed gaily.

Khurram smiled back at her, took 100 gold coins out of his jewelled purse, and before the amazed young girl could open her mouth, picked the glass ring from her fingers and walked off, saying, "You will smile upon me when I slip this bauble onto your fingers along with rubies and diamonds." And so began the story of one of the greatest wonders of the world—the Taj Mahal.

Khurram was no ordinary prince. Son of the emperor Jahangir, he was a direct descendant of Babur, Humayun, and Akbar—the mighty Mughals. They ruled India from the early sixteenth century and were known throughout the world as great empire builders with magnificent courts and legendary wealth. In addition to being able generals and administrators they were patrons of the arts and builders of exquisite monuments.

**Prince Khurram Asks a Favour.** Not one to waste time, Prince Khurram went straight to ask for a private audience with the Empress Nur Jahan, his father's powerful and favourite wife. In fact it was Nur Jahan who virtually ruled the kingdom. She was also Arjumand's aunt, and the young prince hoped that this would be a help when he first spoke his thoughts to one who could manage to make the emperor agree to any wish.

He was granted an audience. The queen waited in her royal robes, seated on a gold throne studded with gems, while the prince hesitated over his



*Jewelled ornament worn by Shah Jahan on his turban.*



*Taken from a well-known miniature, this is a quaint representation of Shah Jahan's father, Jahangir. The emperor stands on a globe, beneath which is an ox, and beneath the ox a large fish. It was a popular Islamic notion that the earth was supported by a large fish.*

opening words.

"What is the matter, Khurram?", she asked in an amused voice. "I have never seen you at a loss for words. Speak out!"

"I . . . I wish to marry, with Your Highness' consent," he stammered out at last.

The queen frowned. Such statements were not expected from a royal prince, for whom marriage meant political alliances. "Whom do you wish to marry?" she asked in a displeased voice.

Khurram's heart sank at her tone. "The Prime Minister, Wazir Asaf Khan's daughter . . . Arjumand Banu Begum."

A smile broke out on the queen's face. "A very beautiful and sweet girl. She has obviously cast a spell on you!"

"As you did on the mind and heart of the emperor, my father Jahangir, who has said: 'All I want is a bowl of wine and a piece of meat. To rule my kingdom I have Nur Mahal'," said the prince.

"I will speak of it to the Emperor," replied Queen Nur Jahan. "But you will have to seek an audience with him. I can only speak a good word for you. The rest depends on His Majesty."

Prince Khurram bent low and bowed before leaving the royal presence. His heart was singing. If the Empress gave her consent, much was won already!

The following day, Prince Khurram was granted an audience with his father. The Emperor Jahangir sat in splendour at the royal court. "I have a special favour to ask of you, Enlightened One," said Prince Khurram in a reverent manner.

"Speak," said the emperor.

"I wish to ask your permission to marry Wazir Asaf Khan's daughter . . ." said the prince.

The news caused a ripple of excitement among the courtiers present.



What would the emperor say?

"You have done well to inform me of your intentions," said the emperor with a reminiscent smile, thinking perhaps of his own youth. "Let permission be granted. But only when the time is right and the astrologers give the auspicious date."

It had been decreed! He would marry Arjumand Banu Begum! But neither the prince nor Arjumand were to know that five long years would pass between the promise and the event, and that neither would have so much as a glimpse of the other, according to Islamic rites during that time.

**The Chosen One of the Palace.** It was the month of March in the year 1612. The weather was cool and the flowers in bloom. The auspicious day had come. The stars were in the proper position, said the astrologers.

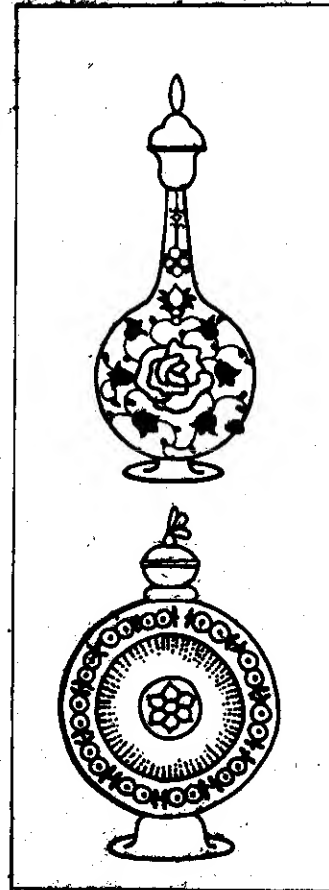
According to Muslim custom, the wedding took place at Arjumand's father's house. While Prime Minister Asaf Khan made elaborate preparations for a never-to-be-forgotten feast, Arjumand was being dressed in beautiful robes that had taken almost four years to make. Scented, bejewelled, and lovely, she awaited the arrival of her bridegroom.

Not far away, the royal wedding procession was on its way. Trumpets and drums in a long procession played the marriage tune. Slaves carrying high wooden torches lit the way on each side. Soldiers on horses and foot kept away the crowds of people from coming too close to the procession. Sitting in gold and silver palanquins and peeping through curtains of gold beads were the royal princesses and noblewomen.

An army of royal officials flanked the royal couple. All wore elaborate gowns and turbans, and scattered roses from embroidered bags held by their slaves. Lesser noblemen and courtiers carried gift trays full of jewels, precious stones, gold, silver, spices, and fruits. Holy men and Muslim priests chanted prayers at the head of the procession. A party of clowns and acrobats turned cart-wheels and played comic acts all along the way.

In the centre of this colourful procession, and close to the emperor and his brothers, rode Prince Khurram. Seated astride a white Arabian mare,

*Ornate vessels were filled with attar or perfumed rose water and sprinkled by attendants, on the noblemen.*



the prince wore a gown studded with jewels and a turban that sparkled with emeralds, rubies and diamonds.

The procession reached the prime minister's home. At midnight a lavish feast was laid out, with rare foods served to every member of the royal party. After the wedding ceremony was over, the emperor said, "I have such great respect and affection for my new daughter-in-law, who has been compared to the stars and the moon in beauty, that I will honour her with a new name."

For a moment there was silence. On the other side of a curtain spun in gold, Arjumand held her breath. The emperor continued, "From this day on she will be called Mumtaz Mahal, or the Chosen One of the Palace!" It was a great honour, and while the prime minister fell on his knees to thank the emperor for this gesture, Prince Khurram kissed his father's jewelled hand. Behind the golden curtain, Arjumand, now Mumtaz Mahal, smiled with happiness as she was greeted by her mother and sisters.

**The Coronation.** For sixteen long and happy years, Prince Khurram and his wife Mumtaz Mahal lived at Agra. While the Prince matured into a wise man, Mumtaz Mahal grew into a woman of refined taste and the mother of twelve children. The Prince was now the seasoned victor of many battles, and a very clever general. Of all Jahangir's sons, he was the most able and the one most likely to be the next emperor of India.

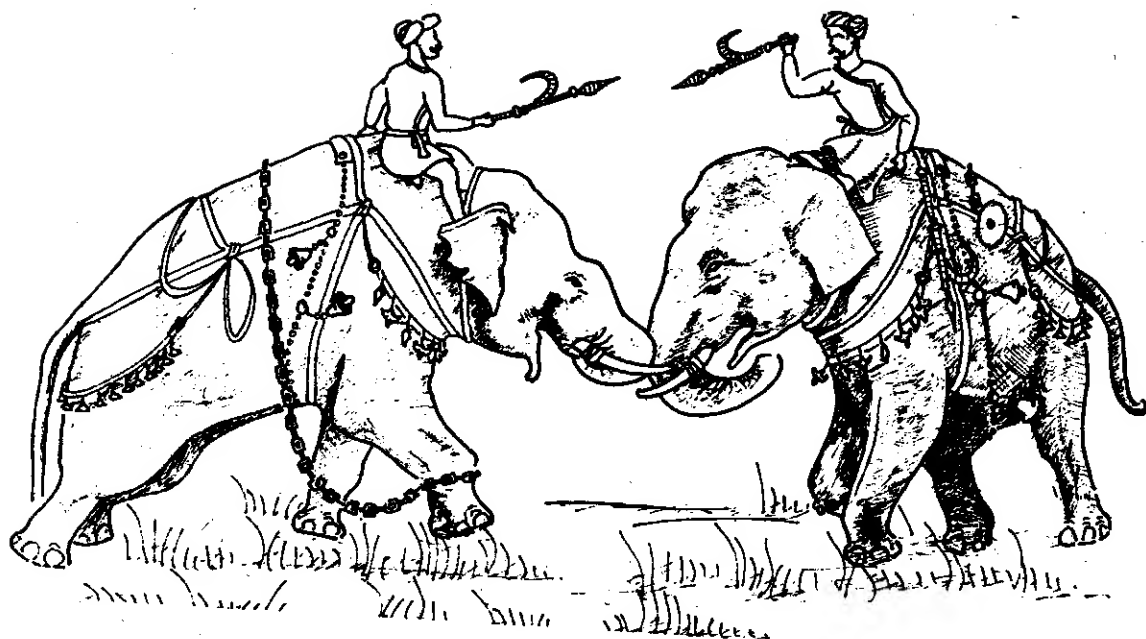
Prince Khurram was also very fortunate in his beautiful wife. Mumtaz Mahal's kindness, sympathy, and goodness were known all over the king-

*Mumtaz Mahal*



dom. Every morning she would see that food and money were distributed to the poor, and the sick attended to. It was said that no one was ever turned away from her palace. Widows, old men, and orphans were looked after and lists of needy people requiring donations and pensions were given by Mumtaz Mahal to the prince. It was no wonder, then, that the people loved her dearly and prayed that she be made their future queen.

In 1627, Emperor Jahangir died. A year later, on 4 February 1628, Prince Khurram was to be crowned emperor of India. His mighty kingdom stretched from the Himalayas in the North to the Upper Deccan in the South, and from



*Only an emperor could order an elephant fight. Like all the Mughal rulers, Shah Jahan loved to watch gaily decorated elephants fighting.*

Khandahar in the West to Assam in the East. Horse riders carried news of the coming coronation to all the distant areas of the Mughal empire. Word spread by travellers and gypsies, and trains of camel took the message far and wide.

Preparations were under way for the ceremony, and invitations were sent to countries as far away as North Africa, Europe and China. Gem-studded tapestries were being embroidered; invaluable carpets were being imported and also woven at the imperial *karkhanas* (workshops), and robes stitched which would never again be worn after the coronation. The royal treasury was thrown open. Lavish decorations were planned. Trays of pearls, emeralds, diamonds, and sapphires were laid out for distribution among the guests. Gold, silver, crushed pearls and precious stones were to be used even in the preparation of food.

Most fabulous of all was the throne being prepared by the master craftsmen of the time. This was the *Thakht-i-Taj*, the famous Peacock Throne, from which the new emperor would rule. It was made of twelve pillars studded with emeralds. At the head of each pillar were bejewelled peacocks, one on each side of a tree studded with diamonds. A canopy made of pure gold was worked on with rubies, sapphires, emeralds and pearls, and leading to the throne were footsteps of beaten silver. Shah Jahan would



never know that the Peacock Throne, built at such great cost and labour, would be plundered a hundred years later, in 1739, by Nadir Shah, an Afghan king, who would ransack Delhi, kill many innocent people and flee to Persia with the throne.

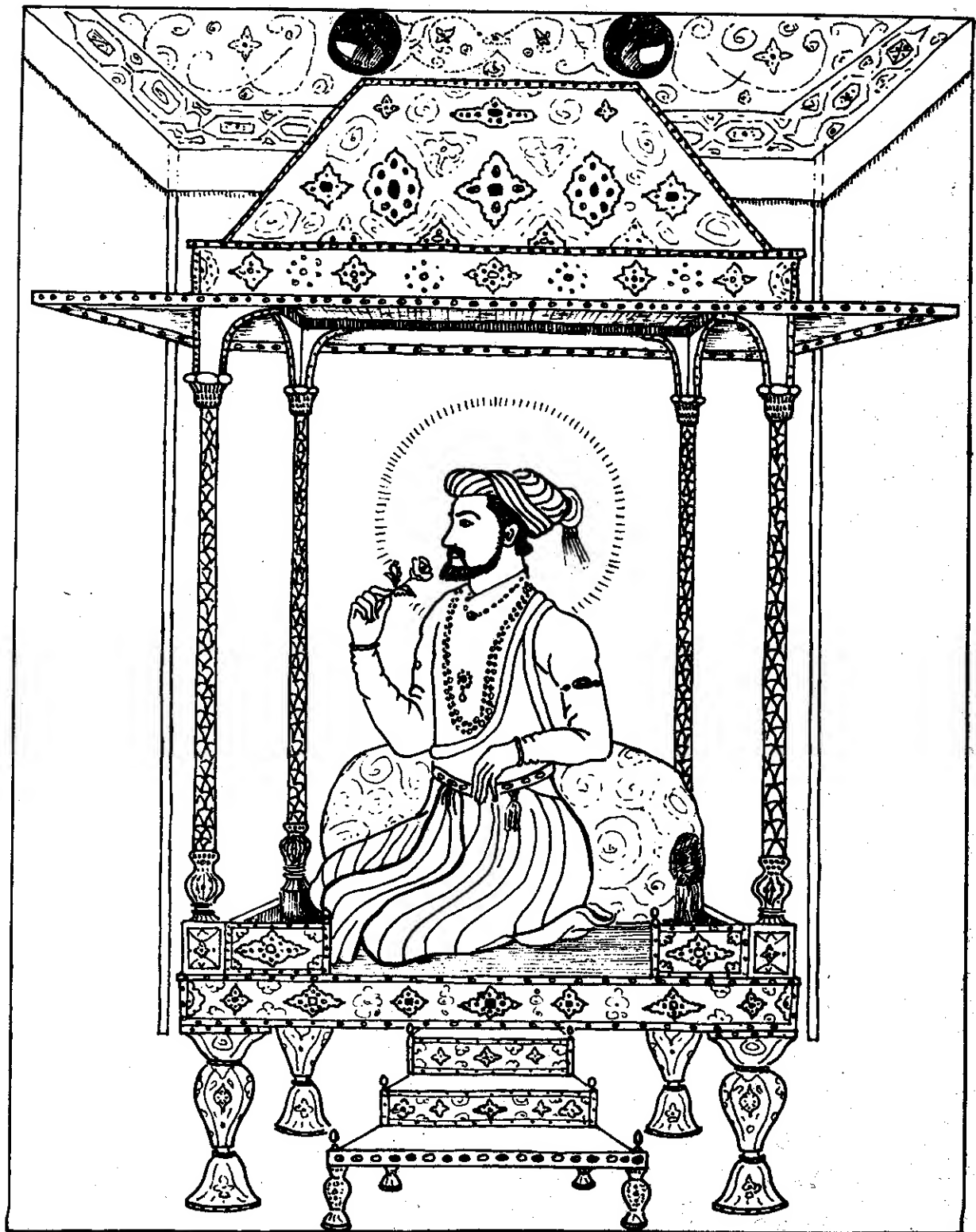
**Thirty Years of Golden Rule.** Prince Khurram was crowned emperor of India, with a new name to honour the event. Henceforth, he was known as Shah Jahan or King of the World. Shah Jahan the Magnificent, as he is known in history, ruled for 30 prosperous and peaceful years, and was the most powerful Mughal king. One of the sources of our information on Shah Jahan are the accounts given by foreign travellers. Francois Bernier, a member of the court of Louis XIV, the great French king, described the court and manners of Mughal India. He wrote how no one sat in the presence of Shah Jahan, except a select few to whom it was a great honour. To show one's feet was a sign of disrespect to the royal presence. A fortune was spent on decorations of pure gold, rubies and brocades in the court.

Jean Baptiste Tavernier, another European, wrote of Shah Jahan's skill as an able administrator and his reputation as a great and just king. Shah Jahan's beautiful wife was no less loved. So intelligent and wise was Mumtaz Mahal, that she was asked for advice on various matters by Shah Jahan. He entrusted her with secrets of state, asked her opinion, discussed and argued over new laws and taxes, and even took her with him on the long and arduous campaigns against rebels in his empire.

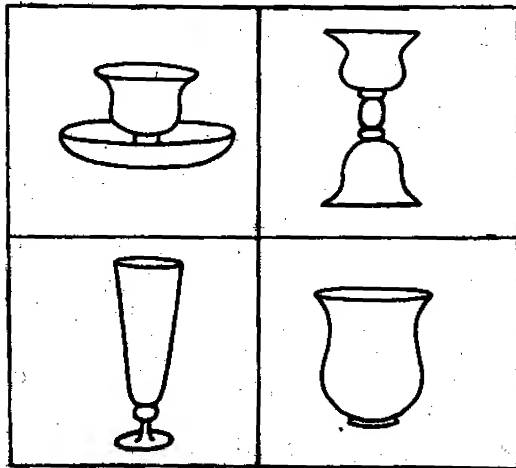
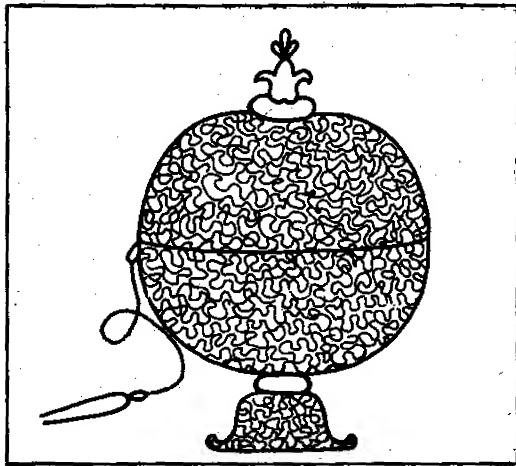
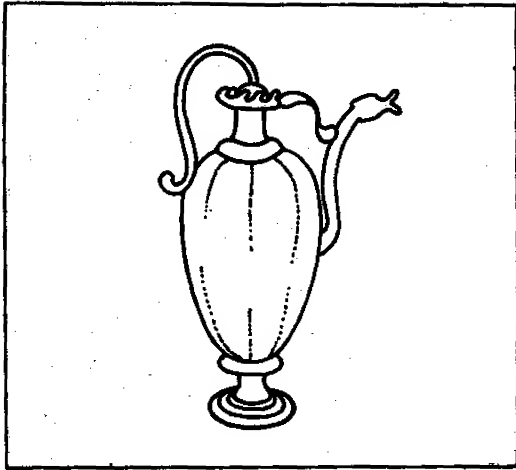
Mumtaz Mahal was entrusted with the royal seal, the Muhr Uzak, which once stamped, could not be repealed by any force in the land—not even by the emperor himself. In the absence of the emperor, the able Mumtaz Mahal carried on the day-to-day matters of governing, and left her husband free to concentrate on wars and battles and the construction of beautiful edifices.

It was during the reign of Shah Jahan that Mughal architecture reached its peak. Under the Mughal emperor Akbar and his successor Jahangir, a new architectural style had developed which combined Persian elements with the existing Hindu styles of architecture. This mixing of Persian and Indian styles brought forward works of great grandeur and beauty. Under Akbar, large building projects were begun. The massive forts at Agra, Lahore, and Allahabad, the city of Fatehpur Sikri, and the construction of his own tomb reveal his deep interest in architecture.

Shah Jahan brought to this art a refinement of taste that was unequalled, and under his patronage architecture flourished as never before. At the Red Fort in Agra, built by Akbar, Shah Jahan rebuilt the Diwan-i-am and the Diwan-i-khas, using white marble inlaid with colourful stones. In addition Shah Jahan built the most exquisite mosque ever to be made by a Mughal king. This was the Pearl Mosque, entirely of white marble except for



*Shah Jahan on the Peacock Throne.*



*Some traditional shapes of goblets, pitchers, cups, and bowls used by the Mughals.*

the floor, which is made of yellow marble. This famous Mughal builder is also responsible for the construction of the Red Fort and the Jama Masjid in Delhi.

The emperor loved his wife dearly and would not spend much time away from her. He took her to the hanging gardens at Lahore and the rose gardens of Kashmir and while presenting her with roses and diamonds, discussed the affairs of state with her. Mumtaz was his confidante and his closest friend. The royal couple would often send prayers to Allah, thanking Him for His bounties and for allowing them a happy and contented life together.

In 1630, Mumtaz Mahal was once again with child. The emperor was happy to hear that his wife was pregnant, and asked her whether she would accompany him to the Deccan, where he was travelling to fight against a strong rebel, Khan Jahan Lodi. Mumtaz Mahal was anxious to accompany her husband, and said that she would not stay back in her present condition, unless the emperor wished to sire a weakling, a coward afraid of the sound of guns.

Shah Jahan, pleased to have the company of his wife on this long journey, made preparations to shift his harem to Burhanpur in the Deccan. A tiny town was erected just outside the city of Burhanpur. It was the military camp of the emperor, but had all the comforts of the court. Richly decorated tents and shelters, brick buildings and two-storied

towers were erected with bazaars selling silk, oils, cosmetics, and jewellery. There were servants and slaves, guards and eunuchs kept to protect the harem.

Leading a troop of elephants, Emperor Shah Jahan, dressed in gold armour, went to battle. The cavalry and infantry as well as soldiers on elephant-back went into battle armed with spears, swords, match-lock rifles, primitive machine-guns and improvised cannons. Victory seemed certain. The emperor, while planning his campaign, was looking forward to its successful end and to a quick return to Agra.

Not far from the emperor, another battle was being fought. The gallant queen, Mumtaz Mahal, lay fighting for her life in the harem in the military city outside Burhanpur. Attended to by Wazir Khan, the famous and able physician, and Satun-nisa, her favourite lady-in-waiting, the queen was not as certain of victory as was her husband. Her child was born, but the queen was very ill. Outside her tent, dozens of Muslim holy men offered prayers to Allah to spare their queen and restore her health. The sound of prayers filled the night, even as the sound of war filled the battlefield.

Soon, a messenger delivered the news of the birth of a baby girl to the emperor in the battlefield.

"And what news have you of the Queen?" asked Shah Jahan impatiently.

"I do not know," said the messenger. "This was the only message I was given."

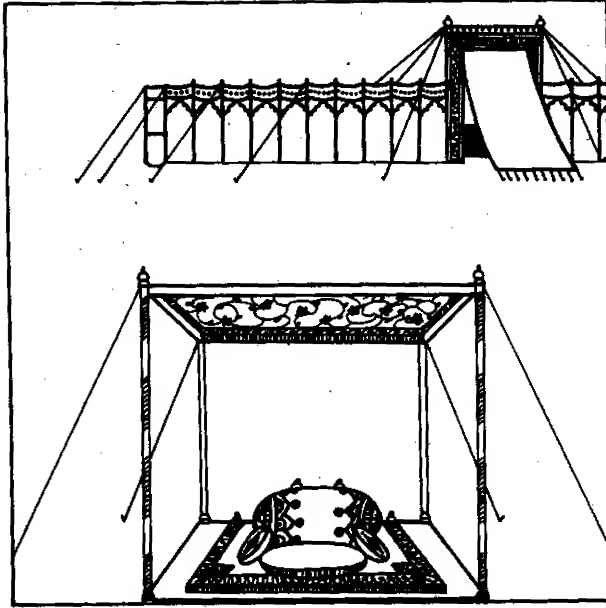
"Fool!" exclaimed the emperor. "Go bring me news of the queen, and do not return without it."

The poor messenger fled. Hours passed. The emperor was worried. Why was there no news of Mumtaz Mahal? Another messenger was sent. He too did not return. Angry, the emperor sent yet another messenger.

At last news arrived. The queen was unwell, and asked to see the emperor. Within minutes the emperor gave directions to his generals, and was soon



*Shah Jahan in his fortieth year.*



Above. Mughal emperors often went on long journeys for hunting or war, for which temporary encampments were set up. There were apartments for the emperor's harem, grand halls where sometimes as many as 1,000 carpets were laid, as well as tents for the servants. Here we see some styles of tents that were used. Facing page. Shah Jahan's troops fight the Afghan rebel, Khan Jahan Lodi's soldiers.

on his way to Burhanpur. On his arrival he heard the sound of voices raised in prayer, and his heart chilled. The queen, his beloved wife, was in grave danger.

As the first rays of sunshine swept the sky, the queen breathed her last. While the emperor wept with grief by her bedside, bugle calls and trumpets heralded his victory over Khan Jahan Lodi.

**A Plan Takes Shape.** The death of his queen left Shah Jahan grief-stricken. Dressed in ordinary white robes he refused to eat, drink or sleep. The affairs of state held no interest for him, and the plunders from his recent victory over Khan Jahan Lodi lay unseen by him. For days the emperor walked alone in the gardens of the palace. He

spoke to none, and none dared approach him.

A month later the emperor ordered his entire empire into mourning. No amusement was allowed, no laughter permitted. Even children were forbidden to play and talk loudly. Beautiful clothes, wine, music, dance, picnics and all entertainment were banned. Anyone caught violating these laws was punished most severely.

Days passed. The empire was still sunk in mourning. People spoke in hushed whispers. Day and night holy men prayed in the imperial mosque, and prayers were said all over the country.

During this period, Shah Jahan had decided to raise a memorial to Mumtaz Mahal which was to be of unsurpassed beauty. One day he announced to his courtiers, "Send word to every nation and country, to every corner of the world, that the emperor of India, Shah Jahan, seeks an architect of vision, an artist blessed with genius, a man above all men, to construct a monument in memory of my queen, Mumtaz Mahal." Word spread in no time to distant lands and far-flung empires, and engineers, architects, artists

and craftsmen began to trickle into Agra. Carrying their designs in silk folders, men of fame and vision came from across the oceans, deserts, and mountains to the court of Shah Jahan.

The emperor sat at a window ledge overlooking the palace of Mumtaz Mahal, and saw each design personally. But he did not find what he was looking for. They were good designs, some even of rare and excellent quality, but not what he wanted. A design that was immortal, that would remain long after he and his successors had vanished, that would awaken a vision of beauty in every one who saw it—this was what he wanted!

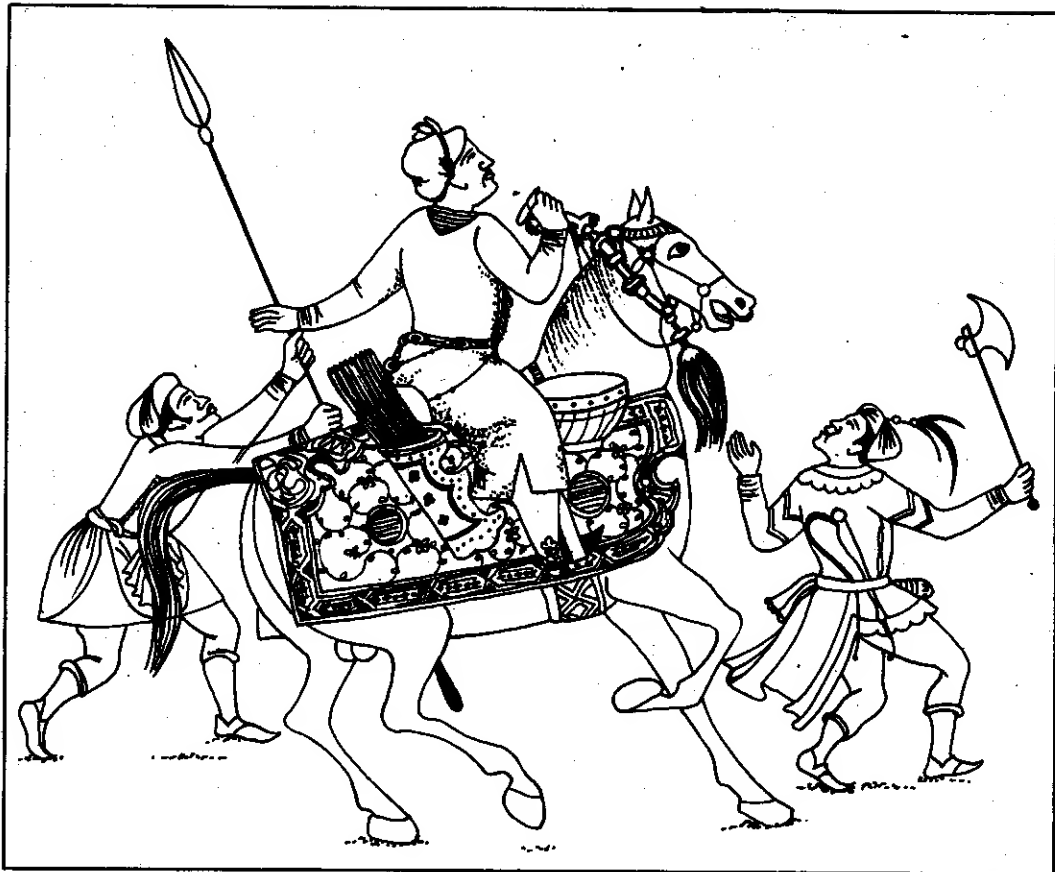
Months passed, and the emperor devoted his entire time to the selection of a design. With a kind word and a heavy heart he continued to return the designs to their owners. Would his dream ever take shape?

Legend has it that one summer morning, to the court of Shah Jahan, came a Turk. He did not look like a man of vision. His eyes were dark with sorrow, his clothes ill-kept and his feet cut and infected. Under his arm, in a spotless white silk roll, was the Turk's drawing.

The emperor looked at the dark and sorrowing figure, then at the oddly clean silk roll. Undoing the roll, he found another sheet of soft white silk.







*A nobleman riding into battle. Note the elaborate coverings on the horse, and the ornate quiver, or container for the arrows.*

Greatly intrigued by the perfect simplicity, he lifted out the drawing. For many long minutes Shah Jahan continued to stare at the design. It was as if he could not tear his eyes away. When at last he did look up, it was to ask one question: "How soon can you make a model of this drawing in wood?"

The Turk looked steadily at the emperor. "Within a week," he replied.

"A week?" asked the emperor in a shocked voice. "It should be ready by tomorrow!"

"Your Majesty, a thing of beauty, even if it be a model, should get proper treatment and time, and this is no ordinary model."

Shah Jahan inclined his head in agreement with the bedraggled stranger who had dared to challenge his authority. Curiosity made the emperor ask, "What is your name, and how did you conceive of this model?"

"My humble name is Ustad Issa," said the Turk. "I too have suffered the loss of a great love. I have, for days and nights, seen nothing but this drawing which I made as a memorial to love. I have been searching for one who could

realise my dream and share it with me. That so great an emperor should do so is something I could not have even dared to think."

"Grief makes all men equal in the eyes of Allah," said the emperor, at peace for the first time in many months. "Bring me the model and we will study it together."

Soon, the wooden model made by Ustad Issa was approved. A state conference was called. The ministers of state were asked to bring information in detail on various items—where could the monument be built; how much did the royal treasury at Agra and Lahore contain; who were the best craftsmen in stone, jewels, calligraphy, sculpture and every other art that an imperial mausoleum might require; and when would be a propitious time, according to the astrologers, to begin work?

Much was to be discussed. Where would the raw material come from—the stones, cement, brick, marble, precious stones? How much would the monument cost? Who would be in charge of finance, administration, and the daily reports of progress? Day by day, information was collected. Slowly the emperor's dream began to take shape.

**A Work of Art is Built.** Shah Jahan chose a site after careful consideration—a green and wooded garden along the banks of a flowing river. In 1631, the body of Queen Mumtaz Mahal was brought from Burhanpur and placed in a temporary tomb near the chosen site. It was within a league of the emperor's palace, and Shah Jahan would visit the area many times during the day.

After many weeks of prayer and consultations with astrologers, work began on the monument. Twenty thousand talented workers were selected and recruited to begin construction. Just outside the site, where the labour force swelled, a new town was formed. It was named Mumtazabad after the queen, and much trouble was taken to construct neat houses, as well as lanes, a system of drainage, and bazaars for the people who lived there. Double storied towers to store cement were built, as well as large brick kilns, and a huge shed where ponies, donkeys, horses and elephants were kept to cart material.

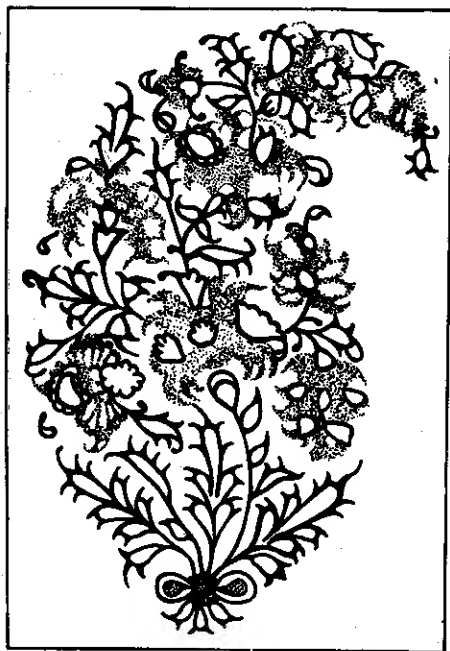
The ground was first dug and filled with sediment, which itself had taken much labour to get. Sediment, or the sand found at the bottom of a river, was used to prevent water leaking into the foundation. In addition, the course of the river was redirected to flow at the foot of the site to improve the setting of the mausoleum. An enormous scaffolding, a temporary platform for construction, was erected. While this was normally made of wood, Shah Jahan used bricks, so that a parallel structure of bricks came up along with the monument.

Shah Jahan invited and paid handsome sums to attract the best artisans and put them to work on his celebrated tomb. In addition to local craftsmen,

the services of the most skilful men of the east were recruited. The Turk, Ismail Afandi, known as a master builder of domes, was invited especially from Turkey to make a perfect hemisphere for the dome of the Taj Mahal.

Qazim Khan, a famous name in gold setting, was called from Lahore to make a flawless, solid gold ornamental cap to crown the dome. Chiranji Lal,

*Below. The cypress tree symbolises perfect faith because of its submission (or islam) to the wind. Its wind-blown form is most often shown as a paisley motif, as here in the delicate design. Facing page. The Taj Mahal.*

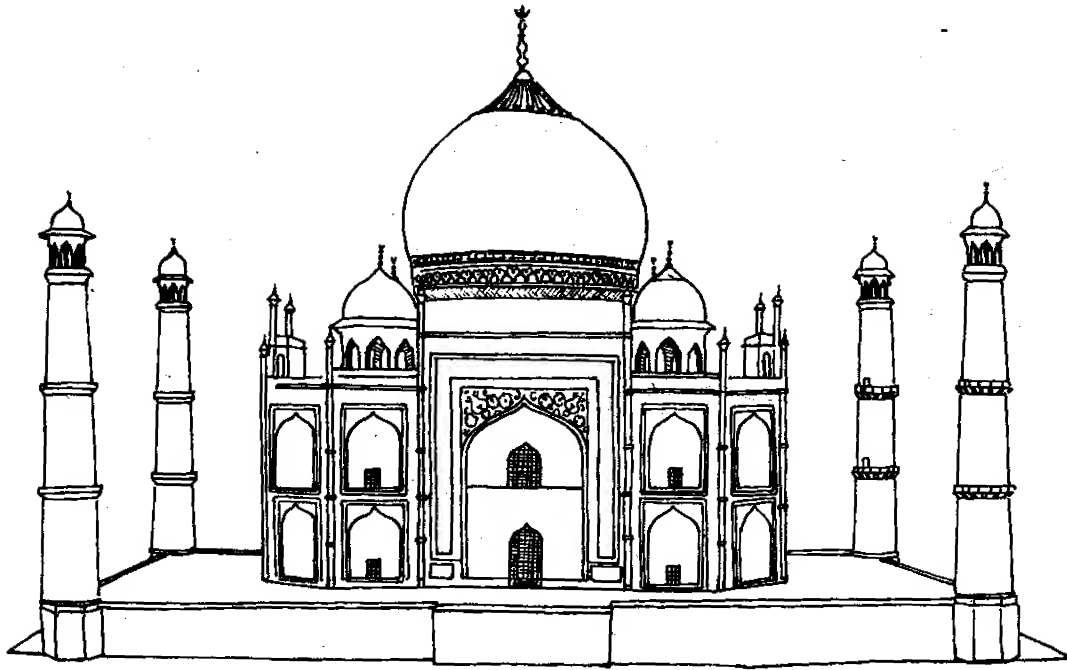


a noted engraver of gems from Delhi, was appointed chief mosaicist to oversee the inlay work (to inlay is to ornament a surface by laying in or inserting jewels, metal, ivory etc.). Amanat Khan, the titled and honoured master calligrapher from Shiraz, was to personally inscribe and adorn the facade and burial chambers with Arabic lettering. Holy verses from the scriptures were to adorn niches and the areas above doorways. These inscriptions were carefully treated in such a way that all the letters appear to be of the same size when read from below. In fact, the letters increase in size as they go higher up the building. Amanat Khan's is the only signature permitted by Shah Jahan at the base of an interior dome.

Mohammed Khan of Baghdad and Roshan Khan of Syria were assistants to the master, Amanat Khan. The master of general arts was another famous artist; Kadir Zeman Khan of Arabia. Sculptors, stone-cutters, engineers, and artists from Balik, Baluchistan, Bukhara, and Persia were invited because of their special skills. There was an artist from South India who did special inlay work, one from Multan who carved exquisite flowers, and another who specialized in making turrets.

Thirty-seven masters formed a nucleus and directed all the work under them. Two trusted and experienced administrators of the emperor were in charge of finance and day-to-day production. With such an international assembly of artists and the unlimited riches of the vast Mughal empire, a never-to-be forgotten creation was in the making, and the emperor was at last content.

Together with the artisans and construction workers, raw material for building and ornamentation also began to flow into Agra. Only a vast and



rich empire could have permitted the use of such lavish material. Red sandstone was brought from quarries in nearby areas, while marble was dug and brought from Makrana and Raiwal in Rajasthan. Blocks of white marble were quarried, selected, and brought in carts pulled by elephants, bulls, and horses. Some blocks were so large that it took teams of 20 and 30 oxen to drag the strongly constructed carts carrying it.

A special road was made to carry sandstone, brick, marble and other material to the building site. This road was ten miles long, and specially layed with clay and pebbles to strengthen it. On this road was seen an endless caravan of carts and carriages, coming or going. The marble, after it was polished and cut to size by hundreds of labourers, was lifted into place by a strong post-and-beam pulley with the help of scores of animals and men who pulled and pushed with all their combined might to haul it into position. The construction site was a scene of constant activity, with thousands of workers labouring day and night at their tasks amidst the shouts of overseers and the grunts of animals carrying heavy burdens.

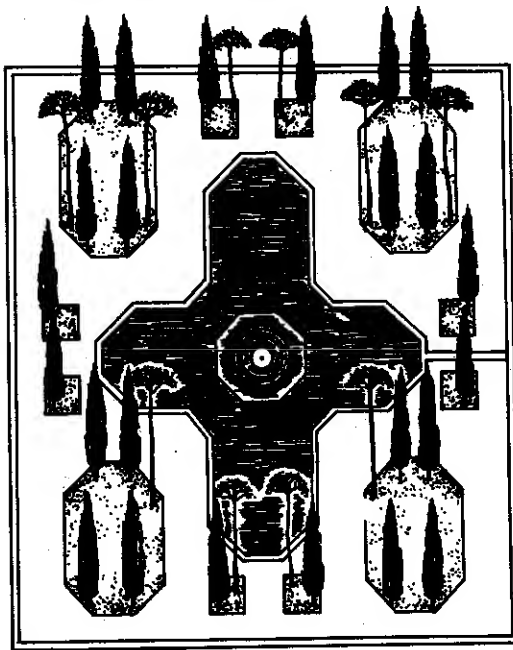
Rare designs and treasures from distant countries were specially sent for. In some cases, friendly kings and emperors gifted unusual and costly gems to show their goodwill to the mighty Mughal emperor. And so it was that large quantities of jade and crystal came from China, lapis-lazuli from Afghanistan, chrysolite from Egypt, turquoise from Tibet, malachite and tiger-eye from North Africa, and rare shells, coral, agate and mother-of-pearl

from areas around the Indian Ocean.

Shah Jahan's teams of gem experts reached all these distant places, and very soon tubfuls of diamonds, topazes, onyxes, garnets and sapphires, along with a variety of semi-precious stones, poured into Agra. Here they were given over to a host of talented gem-cutters who cut the jewels according to size, and polished them before handing them over to the inlay artists. These artists, in turn, ground and further polished them with hand grinders to the required thickness. Interestingly enough, this laborious process of grinding and polishing by hand is still widely used in India today.

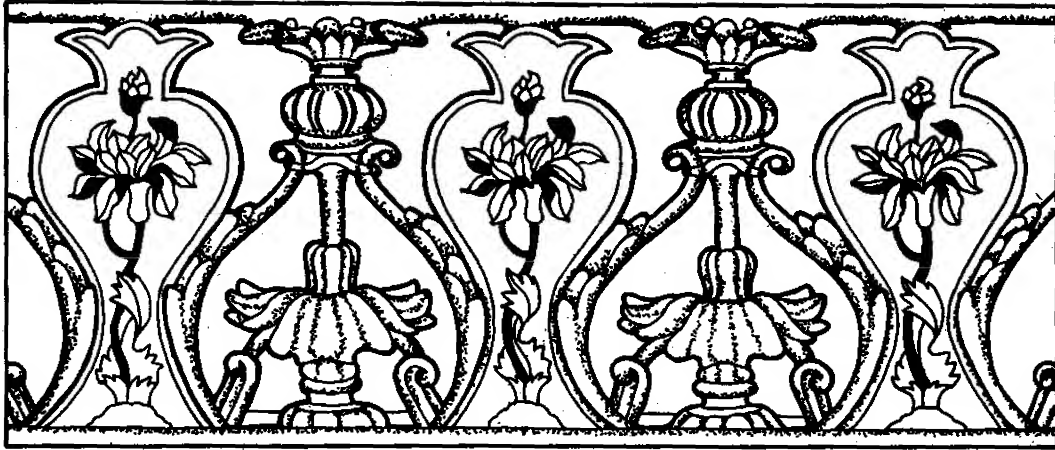
Slowly, the grand mausoleum began to take shape. First was completed the tomb itself, then the two mosques on either side, then the four slender minarets, and last the gateway and other buildings all around. The minarets were built tilting slightly away from the building, so that if they ever fell, they would not damage the building. The minaret, incidentally, is typical of

*Below. A stylized but typical Mughal garden scheme, projecting a strong sense of unity, balance, and harmony. The garden was more than just a contact with nature. It represented paradise. Facing page. Detail of the arabesque decoration in semi-precious stones on the marble screen surrounding the tombs of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal at Agra.*



Muslim architecture, though the Muslims borrowed it from the Romans. Its history can be traced back to the towers or check-posts which occurred at regular intervals along Roman roads. The Muslims adopted this form by making a taller tower, from which the traditional call to prayer was given and heard far and wide.

As the Taj Mahal was constructed, word of its unearthly beauty spread, and visitors from all over the world came to see it. The architects worked undisturbed by the praise of visitors, for they could not make a single flaw in their planning without paying for it with their life. According to religious law, when constructing a mausoleum nothing can be added or removed after it is completed. So to make a mistake was fatal. The Taj Mahal was to grow in perfect order, and with perfection of design.



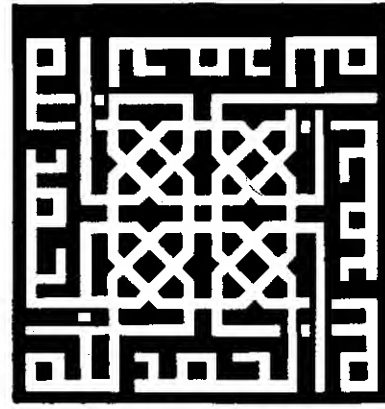
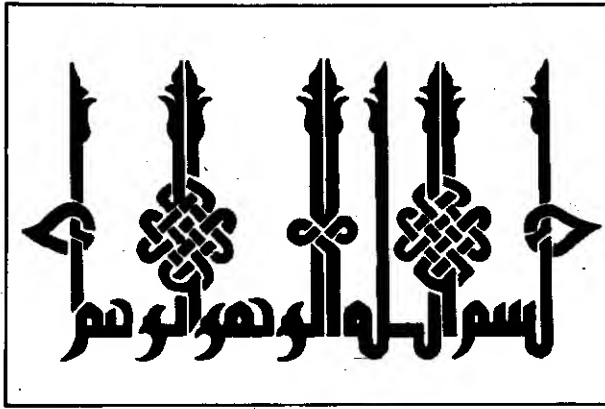
When at last it was complete, the emperor entered in simple robes and knelt in prayer. To the sound of holy verses, the coffin of Mumtaz Mahal was covered with a rich layer of pearls. A railing or balustrade of pure gold was put around it. The most treasured jewels in the kingdom were placed on the casket which was decorated with thirty-five kinds of rare stones in beautiful inlay work. Also, words from the holy scriptures were engraved on the casket by master calligraphers.

A door made of pure jasper was placed in an inner doorway leading to the tomb. Gold lamps and silver candlestands were attached to the walls, and silver gates were placed at the entrance. Exquisite carpets from Persia and India covered the floors of the Taj Mahal, and these were changed every week. Holy men were appointed to ensure that prayers were constantly being said within the tomb. Each year prayers were sent up in memorial service to Mumtaz Mahal on the grounds of the Taj Mahal and thousands of poor people were given alms. Two thousand soldiers guarded the grounds of the tomb, which were being transformed into a beautiful garden with rare plants and trees, and beautiful birds.

It took 20,000 men over 30 years to build the Taj and when the building was complete, it was said that nothing so beautiful and majestic had ever been constructed in the entire world.

Many well-known travellers visited India while this famous monument was being constructed. Tavernier, the famous French traveller, who visited India in 1641, had this to say: "Of all the tombs which one sees at Agra, that of the wife of Shah Jahan is the most splendid. I witnessed the commencement and accomplishment of this great work, on which they have expended 22 years, during which 20,000 men worked incessantly. This is sufficient to enable one to realize that the cost of it has been enormous. It is said that the scaffoldings alone cost more than the entire work, because from want of





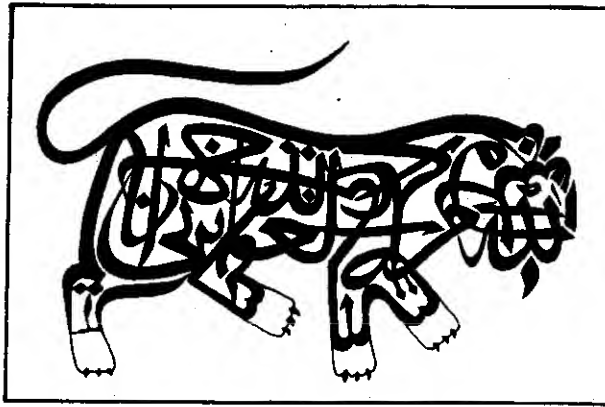
wood, they had all to be made of brick, as well as the supports of the arches. The Taj Mahal has been made near the Tasimacan (a large bazaar) where all foreigners come, so that the whole world should see and admire its magnificence."

Francois Bernier, another noted traveller from France, reported in 1670 to the court of the French king, Louis XIV, on the Taj Mahal: "The edifice has a magnificent appearance and is conceived and executed effectually. Nothing offends the eye; on the contrary, it is delighted with every part and never tired with looking. The last time I visited the Taj Mahal, I thought this extraordinary fabric could not be sufficiently admired."

**A Dream Fulfilled.** The main gateway to the Taj stands 100 feet high, and seems to climb into the sky. The heavy and solid door at the gateway is made of eight different metals and studded with iron knobs. During Shah Jahan's reign it was heavily guarded because of the riches and treasures that were built into the Taj, and no one could enter it without permission. All around the Taj were built high and thick walls to guard it. Sentries patrolled the gardens all day and night.

Once inside the gateway we get our first glimpse of the Taj—an impressive one indeed. Like a jewelled pearl it gleams in simple perfection for all to admire. Running from the gateway to the foot of the Taj is a green "carpet," i.e., the garden around the building. Based on the Persian model, it is divided into squares with a central pavilion. Shah Jahan had several famous gardeners and landscapers work on it. Water is an important part of all Mughal gardens, and two canals divided the garden exactly in the middle. These were lined with two kinds of trees—the cypress tree (symbolising death) and fruit trees (symbolising life).

In the centre was laid a marble tank, which reflected the beauty of the Taj. The water tank and canals had fountains that bubbled with scented water and contained rare fishes from distant lands. A 425 year old tree, whose



Left and facing page. -

*Calligraphy, or the art of handwriting, was used in a variety of ways. The beautiful, stylized inscription on the extreme left reads: "In the name of God, most gracious, most merciful." At centre is a geometric design in calligraphy which reads: "Praise to God." The lion at left symbolizes the strength of God in this superb calligraphic design.*

trunk today is nearly 50 feet in girth, is said to have been in bloom while the Taj was being built.

The dome of the Taj Mahal seems to grow bigger and bigger as it is approached. With its original gold pinnacles, the dome is 243 feet above garden level, and higher than the Qutab Minar in Delhi. It is as much of a wonder inside as it is outside. The architects of Shah Jahan's reign transformed it into an echo chamber, where a soft note is multiplied a hundred times and recedes in such a fashion that the hearer cannot tell when the sound began and when it ended. In Shah Jahan's time this sensitive sound chamber echoed with beautiful notes of prayer sung for Mumtaz Mahal.

In the centre of the building is the burial chamber. It is dimly lit, and even in the day there is only a soft glow of light filtering from the marble screen windows. In the centre is the tomb of Mumtaz Mahal, and next to it that of the great Shah Jahan himself.

The marble caskets are inlaid with a profusion of precious stones and jewels, some of which have since been removed. The calligraphy on the queen's tomb is said to be among the finest in existence. On it are inscribed sacred verses, one of which says, "The illuminated tomb of Arjumand Banu Begum, called Mumtaz Mahal. As Mumtaz from this world does pass away, the angels from heaven come down to greet her." A beautiful screen, delicately carved like lace, surrounds the two caskets.

As a symbol of their love, the coffin of Mumtaz bears the design of a slate while that of the emperor an inkwell. Since it was said that the emperor wrote the desires of his soul on the heart of his wife during their nineteen years together, they would continue to do so in heaven as they did on earth.

Shah Jahan ruled for thirty years, during which time the Taj Mahal was completed and Mughal rule reached its peak of glory. This period is often called the golden age of Mughal rule, and rightly so. Art and craft reached a



new height, the administration was efficient, and the country rich and prosperous.

Shah Jahan, the visionary, began to plan yet another famous tomb... his own, in black marble, to complement the Taj Mahal. "My life's work has been completed," he said, "I must now prepare to join Mumtaz Mahal."

"May the emperor live for another thousand years," prayed the courtiers.

"That cannot be," replied the emperor. "I have done what often appeared to me to be an impossible task. The Taj Mahal, in all its glory, bears out my promise to build a memorial to a great love. Now that my task is finished, my life's work is over." The emperor now called experienced architects to discuss the construction of a twin Taj Mahal in black marble. But that was not to be.

**A Hard Fate.** In 1657 Shah Jahan fell seriously ill. While the imperial doctors gave the emperor various medicines, his condition did not improve. Shah Jahan's daughter, Jahanara, whom he loved most dearly, tended to her father.

Word was sent to Shah Jahan's four sons to come as quick as possible to Agra, for the emperor was in a grave condition. Three of them—Murad, Dara Shukoh, and Shah Shuja—came hurriedly to Agra. His fourth son,

Aurangzeb, remained in the Deccan, where he was busy fighting military campaigns.

The 65-year-old Shah Jahan battled for his life, while his children gathered around him. If the emperor died, which of his sons would be king? Courtiers and noblemen discussed the question, while discord developed among the brothers, each of whom wanted to be emperor.

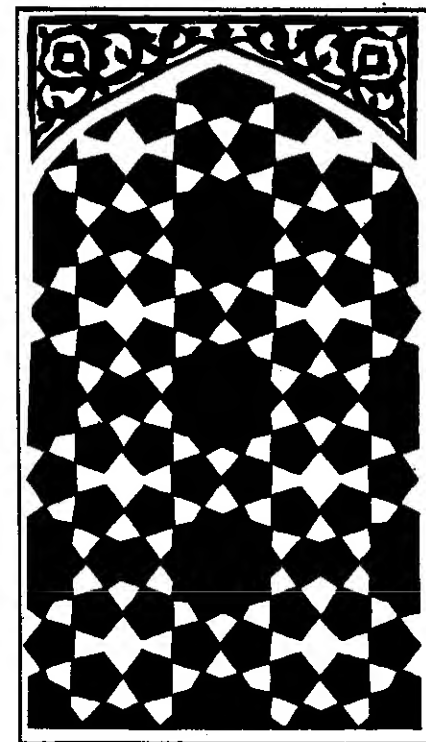
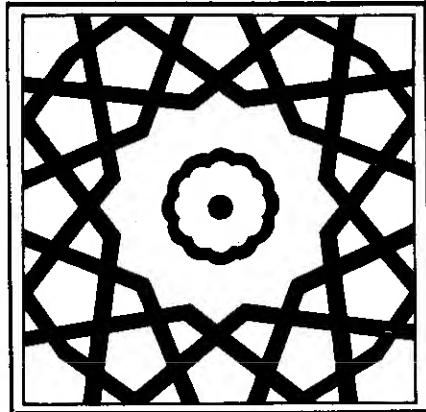
While his sons made plans to rule the kingdom, Shah Jahan recovered from his illness. But by then, such was the seed of ambition sown, that all his sons rose in rebellion and each made a bid to win the crown. The aging emperor was forced into retirement as his young sons fought for the throne.

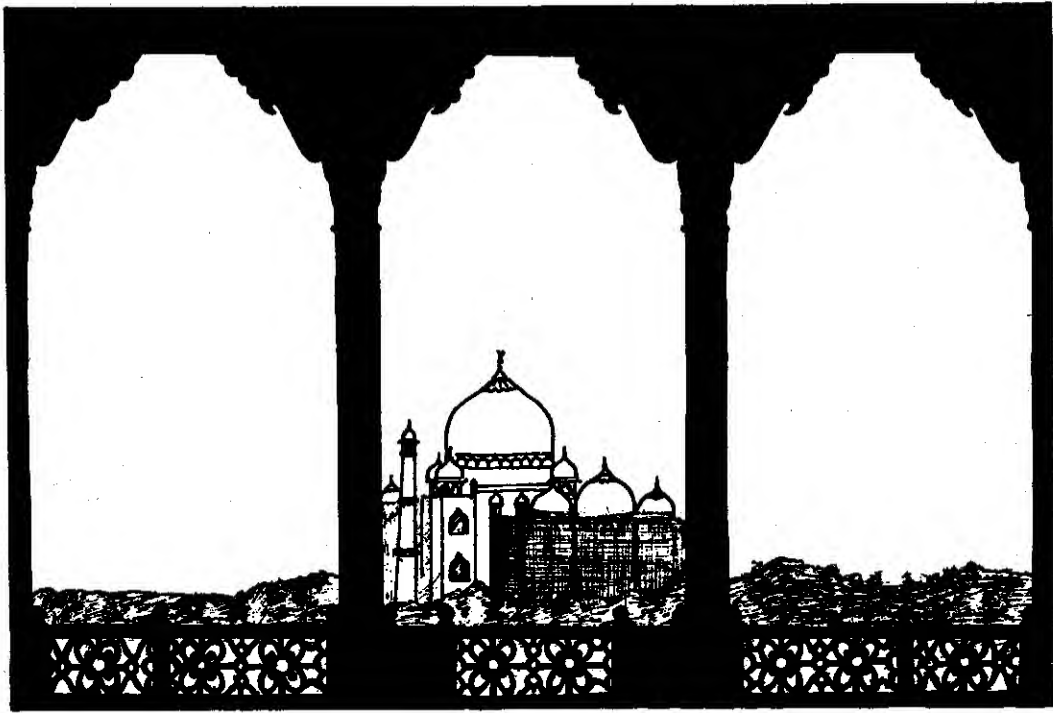
It was the hard-headed Aurangzeb who finally won the crown. His first act was to imprison his father at the Red Fort in Agra. Shah Jahan's friends, courtiers, musicians and men of letters, his favourite jester, his harem, and his entire household were there with him. Therefore, while he was neither ill-treated nor robbed of his riches, he was not allowed to leave the Red Fort.

Aurangzeb, the new emperor, was not fond of pomp and show. He was very religious and shunned gaiety. All of India was to follow these dictums. Inside Red Fort, however, Shah Jahan lived as before. His devoted daughter, Jahanara, took care of his needs and kept him company. For eight years Shah Jahan lived in captivity at the Red Fort. He began his day with a glimpse of his beloved Taj, and before he slept it was the Taj Mahal glittering in the moonlight that he feasted his eyes upon.

One day, his son Aurangzeb came to Shah Jahan and begged his father's forgiveness for what he had done. Shah Jahan forgave

Left. Aurangzeb at prayer. The Mughal emperors had special prayer carpets woven for this purpose. All prayer carpets had an arch, which during prayer was pointed towards the holy city of Mecca. Below. In Islamic architecture human forms were not used, and as a result, geometric forms of great complexity evolved. Here are examples of jalli (screen) work found in the numerous mosques and tombs of the Mughal era.





*The Taj as it appeared to the imprisoned Shah Jahan.*

his son. The old emperor was now a religious man and found comfort in prayers and the view of the tomb.

At the age of 74, Shah Jahan was once again seriously ill. The doctors gathered around his bed, and his daughter Jahanara held his hand.

"I am happy," whispered the old emperor. "I will join my beloved queen once again. Place a mirror near my bed so I can see the Taj Mahal."

A beautiful gem-encrusted mirror was placed near the sick man's bed. Shah Jahan continued to gaze peacefully at the reflection of the Taj in the mirror, while the sound of prayers filled the room. No one knew when the old emperor died. He was found by his daughter, Jahanara, still looking sightlessly into the mirror.

And so a great emperor died. Aurangzeb placed the body of Shah Jahan next to his wife in the Taj Mahal. And although Shah Jahan had planned a black marble Taj as his own tomb, this perhaps is more fitting to his memory.

The Mughal empire has vanished, but Shah Jahan's memory has lived over the years to be remembered again and again as the builder of history's finest monument to a great love. Today, the Taj Mahal stands as one of the architectural wonders of the world, while the story behind this famous monument remains the highest tribute to faith and love, a story for all times.

*The illustrations on p. 3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17 and 24 are by Kamal Aurora. The others are by Rohini Purang.*